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ABSTRACT

Four sets of variables are likely to influence the nature of rural education by the year 2030. The first trend characterizes the mass production model of education and calls for increased specialization. This trend is likely to be replaced by a broader, more integrated one in which the interrelationships between content areas will be more evident and practical application of knowledge and skills will gain importance. Secondly, counter trends in the widely accepted school consolidation policy will continue, and a second round of consolidation will take place which will move many schools from small towns and place them back in rural areas of the country. The third major variable, the centralization of decision making, is expected to undergo changes, as demands for local control by rural communities increase. The fourth variable, that of practicing a philosophy that encourages the homogenization of society by eliminating ethnic and cultural differences, is likely to be replaced by a wider acceptance of bilingual and bicultural education. After 80 years of urbanization and standardization, changes in rural education during the next 50 years are anticipated to be more substantive than quantitative, resulting in a more favorable climate in tune with rural reality. (JD)

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WHAT IS RURAL EDUCATION - THE NEXT 50 YEARS

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Depending on one's perspective, this topic can be either very awesome or very mundane. On the one hand it is ~~very~~ presumptuous to try and say what rural education will be like five years from now, much less 50 years down the road. Or one could argue that at the rate the practice of schooling changes, rural education in the year 2030 will look very much as it does today.

Having just celebrated a half-century birthday, I have a new respect for what 50 years means. And as I look back over the last 50 years, 44 of which have been related to education, first as a student, then a teacher, administrator, project director, state department person -- it seems to me that the major changes in rural education have been quantitative in nature. Through school consolidation, there are now fewer rural schools, and those that exist are bigger. Rural teachers have in most cases at least twice as much professional training as 50 years ago. There are now more instructional resources available, a greater variety of courses are offered most rural students; rural schools have been asked to take on additional responsibilities - providing educational opportunities for a larger percentage of school age children.

Schooling does, however, get conducted today much as it did 50 years ago - a teacher in a classroom with 30 students, plus or minus, using an assortment of textbooks and other instructional materials.

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What about the next 50 years? Whereas the last 50 years has been primarily characterized by quantitative changes, the next 50 are likely to be characterized by more substantive changes.^{RP} Lacking a reliable crystal ball, how does one speculate about the nature of rural education during the next 50 years? Having been a science and math teacher somewhere back in time, it is helpful for me to think in terms of creating a formula for this kind of speculation. There are, as I view the situation, four sets of variables that we need to concern ourselves with - four sets of ingredients which will dictate the future of rural education. In my mind, these variables are not pre-ordained; they can be manipulated by those of us working in rural education. We can weigh some more than others.

The first set of variables which need to be considered are the existing trends in public education. Education, like any social endeavor, has a momentum, an enertia which cannot be overcome quickly. The shape of rural education will in part be determined by these trends, which include specialization, centralization of decision making, bigger is better. I will come back and talk about each of the sets of variables in more detail in a minute. The second set of variables is actually a series of counter trends which basically emerge from the recognition of the limits of existing trends, e.g. limits of specialization, limits of size, limits of centralization . . .!, trends which have recently been articulated by writers such as ^{Schumacher} Shumaker, Toffler, Rifkin. The third set of variables, one

which we have not paid ^{sufficient} ~~much~~ attention to in recent years, is acknowledging ^{the} existing reality of rural communities. We in education generally behaved as if schools in rural communities are just smaller versions of schools in urban communities. This, I think, will change in the coming years.

The final variable, and this may very well be the most important, consists of the values, the philosophy which we as educational leaders bring to the field. What we really believe rural education ought to be will influence to a large extent how we mix the ingredients, how we balance the equation.

Let's look more specifically at each of the four sets of ingredients in more detail before attempting to sketch a picture of rural education in the year 2030. Existing trends in education which are likely to continue to dominate rural education in the near future are those trends which characterize the mass production model of education implemented in this country. This model as it becomes perfected calls for more and more specialization. Students are divided up into grade levels and then sub-grade levels and then into gifted, Title I's, handicapped, EMR's. . . Teachers are not science teachers; they are biology teachers or chemistry teachers. Administrators, at one time principal teachers, now take on all manner of special titles . . . By current standards, the greater number of divisions, the greater number of course offerings a high school education can be broken down into, the better the program.

A corollary to specialization is the notion that bigger is better, a notion which underlies the widely accepted school consolidation policy which over the past 50 years has closed the one-roomed country schools and moved the students to town. In many areas of the country, a second round of consolidation has taken place which often as not removes schools from small towns and places them back out in the country.

A third major trend currently characterizing rural education is the centralization of decision making. More and more of the important education decisions are made further and further away from the local community. Many of those decisions critical to the operation of small rural schools are not even made in the public sector. Textbook companies dictate many if not most of the curriculum decisions in small schools. Professional organizations are making more and more budget decisions on working conditions. State and federal mandates dictate to a large extent how schools operate Title I, 94-142 - Title IX, teacher certification, accreditation . . . Enough of that. I'm sure you know the picture better than I.

A fourth trend which currently permeates rural education is the one-best-system/melting pot notion of schools and society, a theory of taking all the ethnic/cultural differences and boiling them down into a uniform product. The common school system has been a major vehicle for accomplishing this homogenization of society. It has not been too long ago that

students were punished for speaking a language other than English in the classroom. Bilingual/bicultural education is still not a widely accepted practice in most schools.

While these ^{trends} are likely to continue to dominate the immediate future of rural education, there are now strong indications that the pendulum is beginning to swing the other way. Toffler in his new book, The Third Wave, articulates this swing of the pendulum. Rather than a mass/homogenous society, he sees the onset of a demassification of society, a society where opinions about everything from religion to policies to education are becoming less uniform; the diversity of thinking is on the increase, not decreasing. In such a society Tofler suggests that securing a clear majority on any issue will be more and more difficult. And even if one can build a coalition to gain a majority on one issue, the coalition is likely to not hang together on any other issue. The classic example of bootleggers and fundamentalist churches joining together to prevent the sale of hard liquor in many of the eastern Kentucky counties will become commonplace in other policy areas.

As the pendulum swings back and we move from the concept of a mass society, we will see increased demands for shared decision making. Workers, consumers, parents will insist on participating in the control of organizations, particularly the schools. The giant bureaucracies will begin to crack, toppling from their own weight and inefficiency.

Again drawing on concepts from mathematics, these societal changes are emerging because the current trends, the current existing concepts of how best to conduct the business of society and schooling in particular, have reached their limit. They have reached the point of diminishing returns.

For instance - what really is there to gain at the elementary, secondary level of education ~~with~~ ^{from} further specialization? Will a finer classification of students really make that much difference? ^{in the quality of their education?} Is it not better to have teachers who understand the broad structure of their content areas than narrowly prepared technicians? (~~USE EXAMPLE OF BORTCHER HALL AS AN EXAMPLE IN ANOTHER FIELD~~)

The limits of size, the benefits of bigger is better have also been reached. We are now just beginning to realize that administrative overloads and increasing transportation costs readily eat up any savings from large centralized units, be they in education or industry. James Guthrie, in a recent piece on "Organizational Scale and School Success," concludes that economic efficiencies and improved education quality have not been realized from larger education units. What has happened has been a major decrease in the ~~level~~ ^{level} of public participation in the schools. Where there was at one time a board member for every 250 constituents, the average is now one for every 2000 constituents. The president of an Australian automobile

manufacturer commented recently that he would never again build a plant housing 7000 workers; dispersed, smaller units of 300 to 400 workers were more effective/more desirable both from a production and working standpoint.

The trend of centralizing decision making is also rapidly reaching a point of diminishing returns. Toffler maintains that as a society becomes demassified, the level at which various kinds of decisions are being made must be re-examined. Currently, far too many decisions are being made far from the level of implementation. He believes much of the decision making will of necessity need to be more localized, although in some areas, such as controlling the resources of the oceans or further development in space, decisions may need to be made at an international level.

One does not need to look very hard to find all kinds of examples of where decisions made at the federal and even the state level are inappropriate for small rural schools; implementation of Title I, the urban bias of Title IV-C in most states, accreditation standards . . .

Let's look more closely now at small rural schools in relation to these trends and counter trends. Which brings us to the ~~next~~^{third} set of variables in our equation. To the extent that the isolation and small size have buffered rural communities and rural schools from the forces of a mass society, rural

schools are ahead of the pack and in fact many of the characteristics of ruralness coincide fairly closely with those ^{of a} demassified society. For instance, in small towns there still exists a personal/tightly knit sense of community. People tend to be generalists, not specialists; there is a minimum amount of bureaucracy; the small size, personal nature of relationships is conducive to shared decision making; everyone can have their say. So in a more favorable climate, as the pendulum swings away from the mass production, centralized decision making, specialization concepts, the small rural school can indeed build on its strengths rather than spending all its time and energy trying to overcome its weaknesses as defined currently by a mass/urbanized society.

Before working our equation to see what rural education will look like in the next 50 years, we should consider a few more of the characteristics of rural communities which constitute this particular variable ^{of our equation.} The rural culture within which rural education operates still runs more on verbal conversation, verbal agreements rather than written memos. Who said it is likely to be as important as what's said. Time is still governed more by the seasons of the year, rather than a time clock. Values are more traditional. The labor force is made up of entrepreneurs rather than corporate employees; rural people are more inclined to make do, responding to environmental forces rather than rational planning to control

the environment. There is more a spirit of self-sufficiency, taking care of one's own problems, than one finds in the city, where problem solving is left to the "experts."

Rural education in the years ahead will be more sensitive and in tune with these characteristics while at the same time providing bridges to other segments of society with other characteristics. Too often ^{in the past} rural schools, being a part of a mass production/urbanized system, have denied this rural reality.

The final variable in our equation of what rural education will look like in the next 50 years is perhaps the most important. What values, what philosophical commitment, what do we as rural educational leaders really believe that rural education should look like? The strengths and commitments of our beliefs will determine ^{the} what exponential power we assign to this variable. If we believe that the standardized mass production model is the best for rural education, those trends may well be dominant, at least for a while. If one believes that there is more value in decentralization and diversity in education, then those trends are likely to emerge more quickly.

I would like to argue that as we balance our equation for rural education going to the year 2030, the ^{emerging} counter trends of decentralization, smaller size, shared power, placing responsibility for change at the local level is more consistent with rural reality and that those two sets of variables will be weighted more heavily in the years to come.

What then will rural schools look like over the next 50 years? I would like to suggest that the changes will be more substantive than quantitative. School consolidation, while still appropriate for some situations, will not be a major factor in the future of rural education. Both rising transportation costs and ^{The} ^{of} valuing the health of small rural communities will dictate against wholesale closing of small rural schools. The processes of schooling will become much more integrated into the total life of the community, with businesses, government, social organizations serving as an extension of the classroom. Entrance and leaving ages will be less distinct. The concept of teacher will be expanded to include non-certified community members as well as television and micro computers. The training of professional teachers will move from narrow fields of specialization to a true liberal arts ^{preparation} ~~education~~. What will be needed in future years will be professional educators with a broad view of curriculum, a broad view of the world who can orchestrate the specific bits of knowledge and skills which students will pick up from this computer or that resource person. The curriculum will become more integrated. Math will be taught at an appropriate level without confining the content to general math or trigonometry. The interrelationships between content areas math, science, social studies will gain more importance, with all learning geared more to making decisions about the way we live. What is the real impact of ^{using} various pesticides

~~and~~ ^{disposal of} or chemical waste? Is solar or wind energy really practical and how do I determine which system is best for my needs? Involved in such decision making is basic math, physics, chemistry at its best.

Rural education will be more of a hands-on experience in the year 2030, built on the context of the local rural setting. Bronowski in, "The Ascent of Man", states:

We have to understand that the world can only be grasped by action, not by contemplation. The hand is more important than the eye . . . It is the hand that drives the subsequent evolution of the brain . . . I have described the hand when it uses a tool as an instrument of discovery . . . We see this every time a child learns to couple hand and tool together--to lace its shoes, to thread a needle, to fly a kite or to play a penny whistle. With the practical action there goes another, namely finding pleasure in the action for its own sake--in the skill that one perfects, and perfects by being pleased with it. This at bottom is responsible for every work of art, and science too.

Because of size and logistics, students in rural schools can have access to the real context of learning. ^{JP} Rural education

in the next 50 years will do a better job of providing options for its graduates. Existing programs are for the most part ^{educating students To leave the local community,} college prep, future programs should do equally well in this regard, while at the same time offering entrepreneur training which will allow them to earn a decent living without leaving the rural community if that is their choice. And finally, we will accept the fact that rural schools are really an integrated part of the rural community social structure and build on the strengths of this relationship. The education of children is a process that clearly goes beyond the confines of the school. Parents, churches, the general community milieu are all important actors. Education in rural America is the one place where we really have a chance to put ^{these factors} ~~it~~ all together.

For the first time this century, the prevailing winds ^{of society} are changing. Rural education has endured 80 years of urbanization and standardization. The climate to move in another direction is becoming more favorable. By the end of the century, we should be well on our way to have a rural education system much more in tune with rural reality.